

OCT 26 1962

Approved For Release 2000/08/27 : CIA-RDP75

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A Long Ordeal Led to Decision

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THE DRAMA of the final hours leading up to President Kennedy's address to the Nation on Monday evening was of an order such as comes only rarely when a Nation and its people and its leaders are put through a supreme ordeal.

For six days the decision to be taken had been debated in the closest secrecy among the President's most trusted advisers. At times there were nine or 10 men around the table, sometimes 11 or 12. The President's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, present at almost every session, was one of the most vigorous debaters.

During this intense discussion, as one of the participants put it, everybody at one time or another disagreed with everyone else. Should the case for a blockade be taken to the United Nations and the Organization of American States before it was imposed? There were those who felt strongly that this was the proper procedure.

Others, who carried the day, argued in the language of chess that the U. N. move was already blocked and it could end only in futility and waste of precious time. It was known that a large number of Communist bloc ships were en route to Cuba with further material for the offensive build-up that the President was prepared to document in declaring a blockade.

BUT, intensive and even heated though the debate was, reports of a sharp break between hard-line and soft-line advocates is baseless, according to the participants. Such reports have been circulated, aligning the President's adviser for security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, against Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Both men say this is entirely without foundation.

As the decision for an immediate naval blockade was at last approved by the President the drama moved into another phase—ratification. On Monday afternoon first the National Security Council, then the Cabinet and finally at 5 p. m. the congressional leaders filed in and out of the Cabinet room.

From every corner of the country, most of them from the rough and tumble of the hustings at the climax of a political campaign, they had been summoned to Washington. So well had the secret been kept that without exception they had no knowledge of the decision the President had taken, with all its incalculable consequences and which two hours later he was to announce to the world.

Both Republicans and Democrats received the President's statement with quiet acceptance. Contrary to published reports, the members of the Republican opposition did not respond with a demand for even more drastic measures such as an immediate invasion of Cuba. Rep. Charles Halleck, Minority Leader of the House, spoke up at once to tell the President he would have full support in the decision he had taken. Republicans put aside, at any rate in the hushed and foreboding atmosphere of the Cabinet room, the "I told you so" temptation.

FOR ONE of the 16 men so hastily brought to Washington this confrontation had a special element of drama. Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had been about to dedicate a fish farm experiment station at Stuttgart, Ark., one of the pleasant chores of a political campaign.

Cuba had been injected into Fulbright's campaign for re-election by his Republican opponent, Dr. Kenneth Jones, an orthopedic surgeon. Jones, backed in his campaign by the generous wealth of Winthrop Rockefeller, charges that it was Fulbright's advice that resulted in curtailing the Bay of Pigs operation and that this in turn led to the fiasco of April, 1961.

But, as both the President and the Senator sitting across from him understood, Fulbright had warned well in advance of the almost-certain failure of the Bay of Pigs operation since it would not rally the support of the Cuban people. That warning, in the form of a memorandum summing up the Cuban situation, was handed to the President at least 10 days before the decision was reached to give the invasion limited support. While it had impressed the President and he had invited Fulbright to the final conference, the weight of the Central Intelligence Agency and the military on the other side was overwhelming.

In the solemn atmosphere of the Cabinet room, needless to say, these melancholy might-have-beens were unspoken. But with a new and uncertain chapter opening on Cuba they could hardly have been absent from the reflection of at least two of the participants.

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